

**William Skimmyhorn**  
Teaching Philosophy

I hope that my teaching inspires students make the world around them a better place, both through their personal behaviors and their professional work, be it as a practitioner or a researcher. At the heart of this goal is inspiring student learning, within and beyond my classroom. I think that students learn best when they are valued and challenged. I enjoy teaching and interacting with students tremendously and I strive to continually improve my teaching each year in order to inspire them. This philosophy briefly describes my primary goals in teaching, knowing that I surely fall short in these areas from time to time and vary my emphasis on them based on the course and the students. I've spent most of my time teaching students at West Point, undoubtedly a unique group, but I tailor my teaching to different audiences. My written philosophy can only go so far in describing the complexity of the task of teaching and my efforts to do it well, and so I appreciate the opportunity to discuss my teaching in more detail and any feedback you have on these principles. My teaching, like my research, will always be a work in progress.

**1. Get to know the students.** On the first day of class, I ask students to tell me something interesting about themselves, and challenge them to go beyond the obvious. I've found that the more you can build a relationship with students, the more likely you'll be to get them to engage with the course, to find more interesting and relevant applications of the material, and to persist in the course in the face of missteps in along the way (e.g., a bad test performance by them, a bad answer of a tough question in class by me). Typically, I accomplish this by allocating some class time early in the semester to learn not only their names, but their home towns and interests. I also try to have some personal discussion with them whenever we meet outside of class, even if we are meeting for class reasons.

Anonymous student feedback to "***What was the best thing about this course?***"

- *My instructor was great. He was well spoken and cared about his students and their learning. (Advanced Principles, Fall 2013)*
- *The classroom environment was always positive and stimulated my learning ability towards the field of economics (Principles, Spring 2008)*
- *I thoroughly enjoyed the class environment where we had teacher and student discussions that helped to further my learning. (Comparative Economic Systems, Fall 2007)*
- *I really enjoyed the research paper and peer review involved. I found it very professional and I believe the whole process developed me. I liked the rigor of this course and care of the instructors involved--made me proud of my major! (Econometrics, Fall 2016)*

**2. Find lots of applications.** I tend to be very applied in my teaching, striving for contemporary or prominent historical examples as a way of solidifying critical course concepts. This technique proves especially useful for students who are non-economics majors, or economics majors who may not pursue advanced degrees in economics. For example, in Principles courses, I often use personal financial decisions or decisions about allocating study time to illustrate marginal decision-making. In my behavioral economics course, I talk to them about how to deliver both good (i.e., piecemeal) and bad (i.e. at once) news as an application of prospect theory. I am committed to teaching theory, but after teaching more abstract ideas or challenging problems, I try to help students reinforce the underlying principles with some concrete examples that they may remember or relate to better.

Anonymous student feedback to “**What was the best thing about this course?**”

- *Class discussion about current economics. MAJ Skimmyhorn's analysis and input of multiple events/situations was very interesting and gave real world applications to the lessons we were learning. (Principles, Fall 2012)*
- *The real world application and breakdown of this course was refreshing. Every day I saw how it applied to my daily life. (Game Theory & Intro to Behavioral Econ, Spring 2014)*
- *The best thing about this was being introduced to a subject that is incredibly relevant to my life now and in the future. I learned how to better manage my finances and how to better make decisions (disregarding sunk costs, getting on the margin, considering marginal utility). (Advanced Principles, Fall 2014)*
- *It involved a great deal of application with every lesson so that I understood not just the math but the application of that math. I thought there was an adequate balance between proofs and real life application. (Econometrics, Fall 2015)*

**3. Vary the assignments and teaching methods.** Classrooms are as diverse as the learning styles. I try to learn about each individual to tailor material and presentation to reach everyone, but this isn't always possible. So I try to combine a lot of classroom techniques even within one session including lecture, collectively solving problems, having students work at the boards or their desks, giving assignments for return the next meeting, completing boiler-plate note templates over the course of a class, etc... I also require these individually and in small groups to help students build confidence and knowledge from one another.

Anonymous student feedback to “**What was the best thing about this course?**”

- *Classroom activity. (Principles, Spring 2008)*
- *Instructor frequently posed scenarios that encouraged critical thinking and regularly implemented current events into class discussion. (Advanced Principles, Fall 2013)*
- *Was a progression of skill and continued to build on the lessons learned at the beginning[sic] of the course. The games were fun. The instructor understood how to talk to, interact, and motivate cadets. (Game Theory & Intro to Behavioral Econ, Spring 2013)*
- *Taking theory into practice through games at the beginning and end of class. Honestly one of my favorite classes during my time at West Point. (Game Theory & Intro to Behavioral Econ, Spring 2015)*

**4. Establish and maintain high expectations.** Learning is difficult and classes should be too. I've found that students respond to a challenge and while they may complain a bit along the way, they are usually very pleased when they look back on their growth over a challenging semester. Moreover, students need to learn how to deal with mistakes, and even failures. This non-cognitive development seems to me nearly as important as any particular topic in economics. In support of creating a challenging environment, I try to make a conscious choice about the level at which I will teach a course, but I usually strive to challenge the 70<sup>th</sup> percentile student. I complement this by making myself available to those who are struggling.

Anonymous student feedback to “**What was the best thing about this course?**”

- *This was one of the most challenging courses I've taken and has caused me to entirely reevaluate my worldview. The content was extremely fascinating, despite the difficulty. Overall, I'm thoroughly pleased that I took this course. (Game Theory & Intro to Behavioral Econ, Spring 2013)*
- *This course was the hardest course I've taken the at academy and I've enjoyed it's rigor. (Econometrics, Fall 2015)*
- *It really stimulated my thinking. Being able to make a correct inference on a piece of data made my struggle in the class fulfilling. (Econometrics, Fall 2016)*
- *this is one of the most challenging courses[sic] i have ever taken but i think that is what makes it so good. in a lot of classes i have seen or heard about a lot of the things that they talk about but econometrics[sic]*

*was pretty new to me. i learned a lot from this course which was the best part about the course.  
(Econometrics, Fall 2015)*

**5. Continue learning.** I am an enthusiastic and dedicated teacher, but I try not to be complacent. I work hard to continually improve all aspects of my teaching, from course organization to writing exams, to in-class methods. To help me do this I request classroom visits from colleagues, participate in professional development sessions when they arise, and review my own performance after each lesson, making notes for an end of term course/teaching revision. I also take student feedback seriously, though I don't obsess over it. I strive to let my commitment to learning inspire my students' commitment.

Anonymous student feedback to “***What was the best thing about this course?***”

- *The instructor demonstrated a mastery of the material and made everything relevant to our lives. His knowledge of the subject and enthusiasm made Economics one of the few classes I looked forward to attending since I would know I'd always be learning something new and useful. (Principles of Economics, Spring 2008)*
- *The course challenged me everyday[sic] to expand my thinking and encounter something new. There was not a single lesson where I didn't learn something new, and although it was challenging, it was very enjoyable. The course also puts a lot of responsibility on the student to learn by themselves, which I enjoyed. (Game Theory & Intro to Behavioral Econ, Spring 2015)*
- *I think the course topics themselves were the best things. I think more students outside of econ should take this class as it provides the most real insights into the world and Army. This class was the most developmental to me as a critical thinking economist/leader. (Econometrics, Fall 2016)*
- *The instructor was extremely well-versed and well-prepared for every lesson. He presented the material clearly and logically. (Game Theory & Intro to Behavioral Econ, Spring 2014)*

I'm also happy to answer any questions you have, or to discuss teaching in more detail. I will surely benefit from the conversation.

*The very best way to understand how I teach is to visit my classroom – consider yourself invited to West Point!*

If this is infeasible, feel free to contact Colonel David Lyle ([david.lyle@usma.edu](mailto:david.lyle@usma.edu)) or MAJ Oliver Moore ([oliver.moore@usma.edu](mailto:oliver.moore@usma.edu)), both of whom have observed me teach more than 5 times in the past 5 years.